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Central Intelligence Agency



Washington, D.C. 20505

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

16 December 1985

Iraq: The Threat from Declining Morale []

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Summary

Baghdad's inability to end the five-year-old war with Iran is sapping Iraqi morale on the home front and battlefield. Unless this situation is reversed, it will lead to discontent and perhaps even a partial military collapse on the front. Efforts by military or civilian leaders to oust Saddam, however, are likely only if his popularity declines sharply and they conclude that he is leading Iraq to certain defeat. The downturn in Iraqi morale is more a result of war weariness than any military defeats. It probably would be reversed if Baghdad showed a willingness to strike Iran hard. []

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Iraqis are increasingly frustrated by their inability to end the war with Iran and are less certain than before that they have an effective strategy for doing so. In early 1985 they were convinced that by pressing

This memorandum was requested by the Director of Intelligence Programs, NSC, and was prepared by [] the Persian Gulf Division, Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Persian Gulf Division, NESA []

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Iran on the military, economic, and diplomatic fronts, they would force Tehran to the bargaining table. During the past year, however, Iraqi "successes" have not produced the desired results:

- The blunting of a major Iranian ground offensive in March failed to dissuade Iran from continuing its war of attrition and preparing for another offensive.
- The bombing of Iranian cities from March to late June probably increased popular unrest and antiwar sentiment in Iran but never seriously threatened the clerical regime.
- Attacks against Khark Island since mid-August have not reduced Iranian oil revenues significantly and have led Iran to seek alternative export routes for its oil, making further attacks less effective.

In short, repeated escalation has failed to budge Iran, and the Iraqis are running out of fresh ideas. [REDACTED]

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Declining Morale

Popular morale is sagging over the prospect that the war will continue indefinitely. We estimate that Iraq has suffered 350,000 missing, wounded, and killed, the equivalent of 5 million casualties for a population as large as that of the United States. Although the regime has sheltered its citizens from many economic hardships, [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] civilian morale at its lowest point in two years. [REDACTED] civilians are making critical comments about the regime as well as jokes about Iraqi President Saddam Husayn. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] The US Embassy in Baghdad observes that the annual Babylon Festival in September was a noticeably less spirited event than last year. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

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We believe that military morale has not improved since the March offensive. An army general recently told the US Defense Attache that his troops were tired. The US Embassy reports that military deserters were executed publicly in Baghdad in mid-November, suggesting concern about a

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possible rise in desertions and draft dodging. [redacted]
 [redacted] Iraqis are increasingly trying to escape military service,
 particularly in the militia. Ba'thist officials are accepting bribes to
 keep conscripts away from the front. The US Embassy says that although most
 Iraqis still oppose Iran, they want someone else to do the fighting. [redacted]
 [redacted]

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Casualties from increased fighting with Kurdish guerrillas are also
 harming morale somewhat but are unlikely to weigh as heavily as losses on
 the front. The Kurdish Democratic Party and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
 have increased their control over the mountainous border regions north of
 Mosul, Irbil, and Kirkuk and have conducted operations within these cities,
 according to the US Embassy. Baghdad has responded with harsh repression,
 which has caused resentment among the town Kurds. In October,
 demonstrations erupted in the Kurdish city of Sulaymaniyah. According to
 Embassy reporting, martial law was imposed on this city and nearby Irbil.
 [redacted]

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Elsewhere in the country, the effective and ruthless security services
 thought they had eliminated or cowed most opposition activity by Shia
 dissidents. But, there is evidence that some Shias once again are becoming
 a thorn in Baghdad's side. [redacted]
 dissidents battled elements of the Republican Guards Division in early
 October near Al Khalis--the most significant unrest outside Kurdistan in
 several years. [redacted]

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Prospects

The regime's grip on power through the security services and the Ba'th
 party is still strong, and we believe most Iraqis still possess the will to
 resist the Iranian threat. The regime faces increasing challenges, however,
 and the Iraqis are prosecuting the war with less vigor than they once did.
 We agree with a US Embassy assessment that the longer the war drags on, the
 more likely an Iraqi military--and possibly political--collapse becomes. [redacted]
 [redacted]

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At least some elements of the Iraqi military appear to share this view
 and are concerned about an impending major Iranian ground offensive. [redacted]
 [redacted]

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[redacted] earlier this
 month that Iraq is generally confident of its ability to defend Iraqi
 territory but is concerned about being overwhelmed at one sector of the
 front, such as the marshes in the south. The Iranian offensive last March
 temporarily gained control of a main road in the marshes that connects
 Baghdad to Al Basrah, Iraq's second largest city. The Iraqis have had
 similar worries in the past, but they usually put on an optimistic face to
 foreigners. [redacted]

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A complete collapse of Iraq's military is unlikely, but declining morale is increasing the chance that Iran will achieve a significant breakthrough, gain considerable Iraqi territory, and partially isolate Al Basrah before Iraqi troops regroup. Such a development would further erode Iraqi morale and increase the unhappiness of military and civilian leaders about Saddam's conduct of the war.

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To date, Ba'thist civilian and military officers have remained united behind Saddam, because of fear of his security forces and a belief that factionalism would weaken Iraq's ability to resist Iran. The regime has promoted a cult of personality to unite the country behind Saddam as the symbol of Iraqi nationalism. Therefore, senior officials in the regime are likely to try to oust Saddam only if his popularity greatly diminishes and they conclude that he was leading them to defeat.

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Trying to Break Iranian Morale

A significant drop in Iranian fortunes--suggesting an end to the war was in sight--would stiffen Iraq's resolve. The Iraqis have some cause for hope. We believe the Iranians have suffered considerably more economic hardships than have the Iraqis.

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Nonetheless, Baghdad is far from winning a contest of morale against Iran. The Iranian Revolutionary Guard, which is assuming a bigger role in of Tehran's war effort, continues to exhibit a high degree of tenacity and fanaticism. The lack of significant organized opposition within Iran means that even increased hardships for the populace are not likely to lead to a change in the Iranian regime or its war policy. Finally, Iraq has not shown it is willing to strike blows against Iran that are hard enough and continuous enough to disrupt the Iranian economy or war effort:

- Baghdad's concern over the questionable morale of its own troops and the prospect of heavy losses has led it to assume a defensive posture on the front.
- Iraq has shown it can reduce temporarily Iranian oil exports from Khark Island, but it has not made enough low-level bombing raids to achieve this result for more than a few days at a time. Iraq's reasons for not doing so are unclear, but Iraqi leaders have expressed concern that stepped up attacks might unite the Iranian population behind the clerics and create hostility that would long outlast the war. We believe Iraqi fear of losing pilots and planes is equally telling.

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--Iraq could resume bombing Iranian cities without losing many aircraft, but it would risk Iranian retaliation with Scud missiles provided by Libya. (Iran attacked Baghdad with Scuds last June.) The Iraqis probably suspect that their own civilians' morale would suffer more than that of the Iranians in such an exchange.

--Iraq is also capable of bombing Iranian industrial facilities, such as fuel oil refineries and electricity plants, in an effort to disable them and greatly increase civilian hardship. Once again, however, Iraq's leaders appear to fear that major attacks would be counterproductive by uniting Iranians around their leaders. [REDACTED]

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Requests for US and Soviet Assistance

Baghdad's concerns have made it eager to secure foreign, particularly superpower, support. The Iraqi general who expressed concern over an Iranian breakthrough stressed to the [REDACTED] the need for the US to take whatever action was necessary to assure Iraq's ability to defend itself. Saddam almost certainly is making a similar appeal to the Soviets during his present visit to Moscow. Soviet and Iraqi contacts are increasing as Baghdad tries to strengthen relations with the USSR and its East European allies as part of an effort to stem the flow of arms to Iran and to get help in prodding Syria and Libya to end their support for Tehran.

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